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# From the Campaign Trail to Your Library: Put Your Library Staff in the Spotlight and Win Library Support

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ERICA FINDLEY

Erica is a passionate library supporter and is influential in the broader library advocacy ecosystem. Ms. Findley is the Cataloging/Metadata Librarian at Multnomah County Library (OR) and is a 2008 MLS graduate from Emporia State University. She is an OLA member and an active member of the American Library Association where she is an at-large councilor and serves on the ALCTS Leadership Development Committee. Ms. Findley is a co-convenor of the ALA Think Tank and regularly hosts “pop-up libraries” when traveling by train or plane. Ms. Findley can be found online at [www.ericafindley.com](http://www.ericafindley.com).



KATE LASKY

Kate Lasky has been the executive director of Josephine Community Libraries, Inc. since 2010. She holds a master's in education and serves on the Oregon Library Association Public Library Division Board of Directors and the Legislative and Development Committee. She is also a board member for Oregon Humanities. In 2015, she was honored by the Oregon Library Association with the Olé award which annually recognizes an Oregon public library employee who has displayed exceptional effort and excellence.

## Introduction

When there is a funding measure on the ballot for a library, a local independent group is formed to run the campaign for the measure. This political group, sometimes called a local ballot committee or political action committee, educates voters on why they need to vote ‘yes’ on the measure to fund the library. This group can include library workers who volunteer their own time to help with the campaign.

In addition to and separate from this, library staff also have an important role during election time to provide voters with information on the measure and what will happen if the measure does or does not pass. These ‘information only campaigns’ are within the role of librarians as the professionals that are trusted by the public to provide the facts on issues



that impact their communities. Library staff in any position have a responsibility to share this factual information with the public.

Through June 2016 EveryLibrary has worked with library staff and ballot committees on 37 campaigns across the nation. We have assisted with 28 wins and won over \$100 million in stable tax funding for libraries. Four of those campaigns have been in Oregon. Our expertise is based on our experience with library campaigns and is informed by voter polling and survey data. The principles we apply to library campaigns are further informed by best practices from the political sciences and the campaign consulting trade. This article will focus on how libraries can apply one of these principles at any time whether you are planning for a funding measure or do not anticipate one for many years.

### What We Know About Voters

In 2008, De Rosa and Johnson studied why voters and elected officials supported libraries at the ballot box in an OCLC report titled “From Awareness to Funding.” These surveys and interviews provided many insights as to what motivates voters to renew or approve new funding for library operations and facilities. Most remarkable was that the perception of the librarian as one of the main motivators for library support. “Voters who rate the librarian highly on the traits that comprise the ‘passionate librarian’ are more likely to say they would definitely vote yes for a library referendum, ballot initiative or bond measure” (De Rosa & Johnson, 2008, p. 4–9). The term “Librarian,” in this study, does not mean library staff of a certain classification, but any library staff or representative including volunteers, friends, and trustees. To a voter who is unaware of the various classifications and degrees in our profession, any and all of these can be a librarian.

The study also revealed that nationwide, of all voters: 37 percent will definitely vote yes for the library, 37 percent will probably vote yes for the library, and 26 percent will probably or definitely vote no or may vote either way (De Rosa & Johnson, 2008, p. 2–4). Because 37 percent is not enough to win any election, the campaign must find a way to reach the other 37 percent of possible supporters. The ballot committee will need to do some work to reach this group and the library’s information only campaign will need to reach these possible supporters as well.

De Rosa and Johnson also found:

... an important distinction between the public library user and the public library funder. Not every library user is a library funder; not every library funder is a library user. A voter’s willingness to support increased library funding is not driven, or limited, by library use. In fact, the advocacy research found that there is little correlation between frequency of library visits and willingness to increase funding for libraries. (p. 7–2)

Therefore, it is crucial to get library staff outside of the library to meet with groups in the community who have not used the library and may not understand the value of the library services that staff can provide.

Voters will need to be aware that there is a funding measure on the ballot and library staff can assist with that awareness by being ready to provide the facts on what will happen if the funding measure passes or fails. However, there is something else that the library’s information only campaign needs to address. While a yes vote may improve the library services or building, the library staff are the agents and will add value to how the money is be-



ing spent. Like other municipal groups, the library's staff must let the voters know who will be spending tax dollars after the election, making them the candidate in a library election.

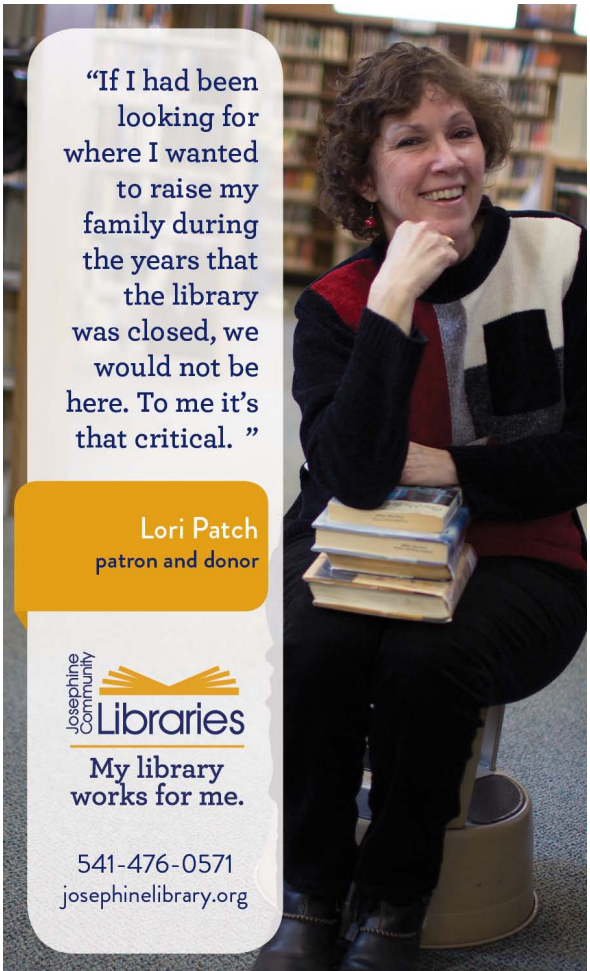
## Librarian as a Candidate in Practice

by Kate Lasky, executive director of Josephine Community Libraries

The libraries in Josephine County closed in May 2007. This left almost 82,000 residents with no access to any form of public library whatsoever. Our community mobilized in an unprecedented effort to reopen the libraries under an interim nonprofit called Josephine Community Libraries. By December 2009, we had reopened all four shuttered locations on a shoestring budget with minimal hours. We knew in order to keep the libraries open we would need a stable source of public funding; so, in November 2014, the board of directors, staff, and volunteers petitioned 11,000 signatures to place a tax measure on the ballot. Unfortunately, the measure didn't pass. However, through our work with EveryLibrary and learning about how to see ourselves as librarian candidates, we learned new skills to connect with our community and demonstrate our passion for public libraries.

My role during the campaign as the library's executive director was to speak with community leaders and influencers. EveryLibrary counseled and trained us on how to best present our key messages and reach beyond the walls of the library. Library staff and volunteers became the voice of the library as well, and we organized a program called Library Ambassadors to offer a series of presentations, workshops, and training sessions out in the community. We also produced commercials, billboards, and newspaper ads that highlighted our existing brand. Our strategy was to flood the community with positive messages about the library and answer factual questions about the ballot measure.

We equipped our staff and volunteers with FAQs, handouts, and PowerPoint printouts to inform and facilitate real-world conversations they'd be having about the library. We developed a webpage for easy access



**"If I had been looking for where I wanted to raise my family during the years that the library was closed, we would not be here. To me it's that critical. "**

**Lori Patch**  
patron and donor

Josephine Community  
**Libraries**

**My library works for me.**

541-476-0571  
josephinelibrary.org

An information-only advertisement helped build value for libraries during the campaign for a library district effort.



to these tools, and created a tracking tool to make sure we were connecting with as many community organizations as possible. EveryLibrary helped us target our Facebook messages more specifically to reach new audiences. Our communications department worked hard to include all library supporters in the process of outreach.

A local radio station offered us a weekly five-minute spot to talk about the library and the ballot measure, as long as we didn't advise people how to vote. This opportunity fell nicely into our information only campaign. If questions came up about the ballot measure that we couldn't answer, we referred people to the political action committee.

The work we did to organize outreach efforts for the information only campaign and create new communications systems that engaged the community lasted beyond the ballot measure itself. Most immediately, the day after the election, people started dropping off donations of what they would have paid in taxes. In response, we formed the concept of creating an easy vehicle for people to make contributions countywide. We created a donation envelope with clear instructions and key messages about the need for funds. As a way to be distinctive, we made the envelope yellow and called it the Yellow Envelope Drive. Because we had been working on outreach for months, we were able to quickly mobilize our 300 volunteers and communications team to support the fundraising drive, get our messages out, and raise the \$180,000 needed to keep our libraries open through the end of the calendar year.

Although the Yellow Envelope Drive was a success, the problem of long-term stable funding still existed. We knew we needed to keep the idea of going back to the ballot in the minds of voters. So, we continued to post a web blog that reflected on taxes and the need for public funding. We also sent a direct mail fundraising appeal to all the individuals and families who signed



Photographs of residents donating through the Yellow Envelope Drive were featured in social media in an effort to raise awareness about library funding.





the petition for the 2014 ballot measure. We included key messages about the importance of libraries and library funding, and asked for donations. While this appeal didn't result in a high return, it did work to keep communication lines open with potential library supporters. EveryLibrary kept in touch with us over the past year, strategizing about the next opportunity for a ballot measure. With their help, we planned to put another measure on the ballot in May 2017.

For us, the most important takeaway from the campaign was the idea of reaching outside of our library bubble. By raising awareness through an information only campaign, we learned new techniques to reach people who never visited the library and had no understanding of its role in our community. EveryLibrary's breadth of experience and practical advice helped us navigate new pathways of communication in our community. The campaign not only helped us create good communications systems and raise funds, but it also helped us build value for libraries in Josephine County.

### **Librarian as a Candidate Anytime**

As part of their daily work, library staff interact with many members of the community. Whether it is with educators doing outreach to schools, or parents when providing early literacy services, or children during storytime, the work that library staff does every day has an impact on the community. These services and others are probably already documented as part of your strategic plan, and that plan should be the foundation for telling others about what the library does for them.

Think of a specific group that uses your library. You may immediately think 'everyone', but concentrate on a unique group. Now think of what the library provides that group and how library staff carry out that work. A story may come to mind like that time when an early reader came in to thank a librarian for improving their reading skills which led to their high school graduation. Or perhaps an older member of the community that was able to get pictures of their grandchild with the computer skills that they learned in a library course.

What other groups in your community have not used the library in a while or may not be aware of the services you can provide? If you had more funding/support/volunteers, would there be an opportunity to serve some of these other groups in your community? These are questions to consider when trying to determine or prioritize the groups that library staff should visit. Visiting these groups will help you create an awareness of what the library needs, as well as cultivate a positive perception of library staff ahead of an ask.

### **How You Can Win Library Support Every Time**

The experience of Kate Lasky at Josephine Community Libraries tells us that if you can get out into the community and convey the value of the passionate librarian through telling the story of your impact, then people will show up to support the library. By using these same campaign techniques you can win library support in other times of need such as fundraising as a result of budget cuts, asking the city council for continued funding, and to recruit volunteers in your community to support improved services.

Often presidential candidates write books at the start or sometimes prior to their presidential campaign as a way of surfacing themselves and their values to voters. Library staff can also use this technique as the first step in surfacing their work and its meaningful impact




on the community. You have probably written this book before without thinking of it in this way. This is your strategic plan. It should go beyond sharing numbers, facts, and figures to tell the story of what you do. It should highlight the library's services and the individuals that make these services happen.

Have more meetings with people. Get coffee with your elected officials, find out what their plans are for the city and how the library can support them. Target your story of impact to the person you are meeting. Consider summer literacy programs for your meeting with the PTA or how the library prepares job seekers and helps people start businesses for your meeting with the chamber of commerce or how the library is a place where teens can become involved in their community for your meeting with the public schools. If you are not the staff person providing the service you plan to highlight at the meeting, consider letting those staff members have the meetings and deliver the messages of impact.

You may already have print or electronic newsletters or social media channels for sharing library related news. Applying what we know about the strong influence of a positive perception of librarians during a campaign, use these to feature your staff members and the work they do. Make sure to feature staff with different perspectives and from different levels of the organization. You can also share testimonials from members of the community about how librarians and library services have impacted their lives. Sharing stories can be done at no cost, but if you have the budget, spend it on targeted Facebook ads. This can be a great way to reach people in your zip codes that may not self-identify as a fan of the library, but will respond to a nudge to become one.

There is no magic bullet or checklist for getting library support, but one recommendation for any and every library is to get out and build engagement with door to door visits. Library card sign up month is every September. This is the perfect event for any type of library to get staff, volunteers, friends, and board members out into your community. Public libraries can target underserved areas, school libraries can advocate for parents to contact their board for school library funding, and academic libraries can reach out to new students in a more personalized way than their first-day library tour. If you are worried about a public that is not used to seeing you outside of the library, then couch your reason for doing this into a strategic plan. Did you recently do a survey that did not have a big enough sample? Did you want to open up your strategic/building/budget plan for public comment?

## Conclusion

Kate Lasky's application of librarian as a candidate for Josephine Community Libraries shows practical ways to take your story out into the community and to shift the perception of the librarian from a defensive "everyone needs the library" into one that is based on real impact and is deserving of support. When creating your own plans, remember that the perception of the librarian is co-equal to the perception of the library. You are the candidate. Thanks for running! 

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